A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

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Chapter 44

Watching Coruscant politics collectively go up in flames as an ancient and unshakable institution suddenly began to unravel overnight was the delight of Nute Gunray's evening.

"...it is still unclear just how many of these Jedi sorcerers have deserted their main branch," Nal Verik, the dour Muun main co-anchor for shadowfeed news channel Raxus Today was saying. "Reports range from less than a dozen to several hundred."

"The consequences of this apparent schism in the Jedi Order could be more severe than anyone realizes," said Sarina Crena, the Human co-anchor, a woman who always looked a little too cheerful and energetic. "The Jedi have been seen as upholders of the Republic's constitutional values and principles of non-aggression for a thousand years. This is, of course, nonsense."

Gunray snorted back laughter.

Crena explained to her viewers, in case they needed help: "As we all know, it was the Jedi who launched an unprovoked attack on Separatists holdings at Geonosis, almost four years ago, and began this war of Coreward aggression."

"Indeed, it is so," said Nal Verik, nodding along, a serious expression on his face. "The Jedi claim to be keepers of the peace and yet are the chief instruments in stopping a movement against the corruption and tyranny of Coruscant. It may have been inevitable that they would collapse under the weight of this hypocrisy. Perhaps this young Ardabur Aspar deserves our respect for finally coming clean?"

"I wouldn't go that far," Crena muttered.

Gunray did laugh this time. Raxus Today was slant news, there was no arguing it. But it was *his* slant, and that was why he watched the holoprogram. They obviously ran out of any actual news, because soon enough, they had a guest on air, one Doctor Bleys Harand, a Corellian archaeologist and historian who'd lived in Tionese space for over twenty years. He'd lost that piercing accent of Corellia, subtly shifted over into the sharp tones and softer vowels of Raxus, but less refined than the proper Raxulon city dialect. Harand sounded like the provincials. There had been a point in his life when Nute Gunray hadn't been able to tell one Human apart from any other, now he could pinpoint accents. *Humans here, Humans there,* thought Gunray. *I can't escape these people!*

"Doctor Harand, is this schism unprecedented in galactic history?" asked Crena.

"No- well, not exactly," said Harand, his Human face blasted by wind and scorched by sun, the marks of two dozen summers in the field on remote planets. "This is actually the fifth schism the Jedi Order had in as many millennia. The first four all involved Sith. This one *is* unique in that regard: there is no apparent Sith Order forming out of this. And that's because the Sith went extinct at the Battle of Ruusan a thousand years ago–well, nine hundred and eighty two years ago–at the formation of the modern Republic. We don't know what two different Jedi orders might mean."

"What made the Sith different from the Jedi?" asked Nal Verik.

"That's a question a lot of outsiders have asked in the last few centuries. Both are elite organizations of psychokineticly gifted individuals, using similar weapons, dressing in similar styles, espousing similar philosophies... None of them have much regard for us normal people," Harand said, offering a wry smile. "Just look at the current situation! I will say this: Chancellor Tarkin was very careful in his wording. These so-called knights of the Republic answer to *him,* not the Senate. This is a dramatic shift in the balance of power on Coruscant, where you may consider this to be an unprecedented event. But I leave the analysis of that to political experts..."

The talk went on for a while, and Gunray lost interest. He switched to another shadowfeed stream, a Neimoidian one presented in his mother tongue. There were moments when the presenter used words Gunray didn't catch. He'd been thinking in Basic for a long time, now. Too long. *Maybe I should see what Rune Haako is up to, that old scoundrel,* Gunray thought. But as he did, his communicator rang.

"What?" Gunray asked, discarding courtesy.

"Ah, Viceroy Gunray-" a familiar voice said, in a whinging voice.

"Minister Gunray."

"Minister Gunray, my old friend, I'm ashamed to say it, but I'm in a bit of trouble." It was Tikkes, the Quarren Isolation League representative. Who'd embarrassed his organization by siding with the coup attempt last year and survived only by Grievous finding it more expedient not to offend his useful underlings than to kill him. Tikkes had fallen on some very hard times since then, his funds and friends alike dwindling.

"What is it this time?"

"Well, Minister, my check bounced when I tried to pay my rent this week, and now the landlord is threatening to call the city police, and-"

Gunray leaned forward, burying his face in his hands.

Asajj Ventress grunted, pushing her arms up one last time, and let the barbell clatter into the rack. She wiped the sweat off her face, and exhaled. *I'm definitely back to normal,* she thought, feeling a painful yet pleasant burn in her muscles. Ahsoka Tano, her alleged spotter in today's final session of physical rehabilitation, was talking to the dreadful Obi-wan Kenobi via hologram transmission.

"How bad is it over there?" asked Ahsoka.

"Bad," said Kenobi. "It's not just knights defecting, we're losing masters. Koffi Arana went over this morning. Jastus Farr and Shadday Potkin announced their loyalty to Tarkin too, from their deployments in the Outer Rim."

"Sounds like you're in real trouble," Asajj said, butting into projector range, gym towel over her shoulders.

"Asajj, my dear, how nice to see your lovely face again!" said Kenobi, smiling pleasantly. Asajj rolled her eyes.

"Save it, Kenobi. I'm just here to gloat."

"And I thought I was so charming..."

"In your dreams!"

"Stop flirting, you two," Ahsoka groaned. "This is serious. There's dozens of Jedi joining up with that sleazeball Tarkin. I don't like where this is going. We need to be concerned!"

Asajj narrowed her eyes. "I know that tone of voice. That's the tone you get when you're about to convince someone to do something based on your self-righteous assumptions of moral superiority."

"Who's spent the last few months of her life helping you put yourself back together again?" asked Ahsoka.

"Ladies, please, there's no need to fight," Kenobi said, his hologram image waving his arms. "I think Ahsoka's right, this is something that concerns you two. You're Force-users with lightsabers out in the Galaxy, actively practicing your skills and powers, not aligned to any side. And lines are being drawn, here. Tarkin's so-called Knights of the Republic may not turn a blind eye to you two like we have."

That was an unpleasant thought. *Regulated? Me? Never!* If there was one thing Asajj had learned to distrust in her life, it was centralized authority, be it the Jedi High Council or the entire Republic itself. "You'll never get me on a list," she said.

"Do you *really* want to be an outlaw again?" Ahsoka asked.

"Better to be an outlaw than to have some government snooping on me."

"That's why we need to do something," said Ahsoka, putting a fist in her palm. "If we just sit here on Commenor, it'll be out of our hands."

"Okay, let's just walk into the Senate building and ask Tarkin to not to be a power-hungry maniac. I'm sure that'll work well."

"I don't see you coming up with any ideas!"

"I say we take the next transport to Zeltros we can, get my ship out of the impound lot it's probably sitting in, and then fly to Nar Shaddaa, where we get a comfy security gig for some Hutt, and wait for this whole thing to blow over."

"Nar Shaddaa? Ew. I'm not stepping foot on that moon in a million years-"

"There's a healthy middle ground here," Kenobi interrupted, "between going straight at Tarkin and sticking your head in the proverbial sand of Nar Shaddaa."

Already, Asajj didn't like where this was going. "Don't say it, Kenobi."

"I'm not saying join the Jedi Order. Simply place yourselves in our protection. Nothing will change, you'll just have the Council shielding you."

Neither woman liked that idea. "Yeah, the same Council that sold me out," said Ahsoka, frowning. "I can definitely trust them."

"Kid's got a point," Asajj said.

"What about a neutral party, then?" asked Kenobi. "Say, Mandalore. Bo-Katan could use some help, there's reactionaries and Death Watch saboteurs stirring up trouble."

Mandalore... I've heard worse ideas. Ironic, that'll take me back to where this all started... "I can do Mandalore," said Asajj.

"Really?" asked Ahsoka. "That was easy- I mean, uh, yeah, let's go to Mandalore. *Not* Nar Shaddaa."

Esera woke to her communicator screaming at her. *Emergency signal,* she thought, the fog of sleep vanishing from her mind as she shot out of bed. "Komara here," she spoke into it.

"Emberlener's are back, Captain, and they ain't lookin' too good," Buna's voice came through. "We're goin' to battle stations!"

"I hear you, Buna," Esera said. "Keep me posted."

The line went off. Esera got dressed, woke up Voyan, and managed to get a glass of water before the Emberleners were at her door. It was Major Itrura, looking just as tired as Esera felt, but in full uniform. "Lady Komara, you're still up?" she asked.

"Woke up ten minutes ago," said Esera.

"The Armada's back in the system. Your presence is required in the war room."

"I'll be along in a moment, my-" Esera nearly said *engineer,* and that would have blown Voyan's cover as a harmless house husband right there, "-Miha is still getting ready." She tried not to cringe at the words coming out of her mouth.

Itrura frowned. "Why do you need a male for this?"

Esera was tired enough that she went with the first answer to pop into her mind: "I trust him." The Emberlener raised an eyebrow, but she didn't pry further. Luckily, Miha Voyan wasn't like the Sephi sisters, he could go from fast asleep to on his way to an important meeting in five minutes. Lirka and Sirka would have needed an hour at least.

Most of the Elders were there already, including the Force-sensitive. A holoprojector displayed a chart of the star system, and all ships present. Layers of faint contours showed where they had the latest information and where time-lag was involved. "Time-lag?" Esera asked Voyan in a quiet voice.

"There's no hyperwave scanners in this system. They're relying on electromagnetic radiation, which is limited to the speed of light, or rather, the speed of causality-"

"I don't know what that word means, Miha."

Her engineer closed his eyes for a moment, once again realizing he was dealing with someone who'd never even learned trigonometry, let alone physics. "Information, usually in the form of light, takes time to travel through space," said Voyan. "About three hundred million meters per second. Functionally instant, between the two of us down here. But things in space are billions, trillions, quadrillions, of meters apart. Sometimes even further. In our case, information is being sent as light waves from things in space to us. We're seven light-minutes from the local star. If the enemy shows up in orbit of the star, we won't know they're there for seven minutes. This principle applies to every single object in this system."

"So if Buna moves *Encounter* away from the planet... it'll take minutes for our messages to reach her, and minutes more for her response to reach us. She's as blind as we are."

"That would be exactly right, except *Encounter* has a hyperwave array. She'll be able to see anything within a few billion kilometers of her in real time, because hyperwaves move through another dimension much, much faster than our universe's speed of causality. But, trying to see anything further than a few billion kilometers away, and she'll be dealing with time-lag too. And since there's no hyperwave comms down here, all our communication with *Encounter* will be time-lagged as she moves away, just like you said."

"This adds an entirely new dimension to space warfare," Esera sighed.

"It's nothing we're not used to," Voyan said. "A lot of backwater systems don't have hyperwave scanners or relays. Pirates love to set up ambushes in them, using in-system jumps to outrun their own information wavefronts and hit unsuspecting targets before they know what they're dealing with. I should know, I've been on the receiving end. Buna's probably done it a hundred times... Probably never with anything as basic as an OOM-series pilot droid navigator, though." Major Itrura wouldn't know it, but this is why Esera had brought Voyan. Knowledge was power, and her Jedi upbringing wasn't conducive to her current job.

The Emberlener Armada was in a sad state. Nineteen ships out of the sixty remaining before had returned. A century of painstaking build-up undone in a few months. Esera almost felt sorry for Emberlene, until she remembered they'd started this war without provocation, for no reasons other than greed for wealth and lust for power. If there was ever a war with clear-cut good and bad sides, this little brawl in the Authala Sector was it. And Esera was helping the wrong side. But she had no choice, because Grievous's Emberlener contingent were some of his best officers, and they *were* on the right side. From Esera's point of view, at least.

At the Temple, no one had ever taught them starship battle tactics. Jedi simply did not fight in capital ships. Esera knew how to fly a starfighter, she could fly a ship like *Whirlwind*. Somehow, she'd even brought *Encounter* home in slightly less than one piece from a battle with a star destroyer. But organizing a multi-ship battle was far beyond her and she knew it. So she'd leave that to experts like the Emberlene admiralty and Buna.

I'm really just here in case the enemy tries to negotiate, thought Esera. And as minutes turned to hours, and nothing happened, Esera's lack of sleep caught up with her. She nodded off where she sat, and only Voyan stopped her from slumping out of her chair.

"Perhaps Lady Komara would like some time to rest?" General Taclai suggested, glaring daggers at her. The Eldest nodded.

"Yes, I think she should," she said. "I'd rather have our envoy up to her full potential when we need her, and we don't, right now." Esera was too tired to argue or save face. They gave her and Voyan a little conference room to themselves, and she really did fall asleep this time.

Hours must have passed, and the sun was well past risen when Esera woke next. "I'm hungry," she muttered, rubbing her eyes.

"I'm sure they've got something to eat around here," said Voyan, looking up from his datapad.

"Have you been reading this entire time?"

"Yes."

"About what?"

"They found another black dwarf star in the Atravis sector," Voyan said. "Spooky stuff. Those shouldn't even exist, given the current age of the universe-"

"Hold on." Esera blinked the fog out of her eyes as a memory tried to wriggle its way to the surface of her mind. She'd heard those three words in the past, out of Voyan's mouth. Murshida had been there, she was sure. "You've mentioned those things before, Voy- uh, Miha."

"Probably?" Her engineer shrugged. "Mysteries intrigue me. Mechanical, historical, astronomical..."

Before they could go any further, a servant entered the conference room. "Mistress Aredian extends her invitation to breakfast to you, Lady Komara, as well as your husband," the woman said.

"Who?" asked Esera.

"The eldest of the Eleven Elders, Lady Komara."

"Oh." Esera's stomach twisted. She was hungry, but this Aredian had tried to get into her mind yesterday, and Voyan's. That was a dangerous woman. But hunger won out, and off they went, to Aredian's apartment in the palatial headquarters of the Mistryl Army.

There, for the first time on the planet, they met an Emberlener man. He was old, almost as old as the Eldest of the council, bent and worn by age. "You must be the Raxians," he said to them at the door. "Come, come in."

Esera and Voyan shared a look. Everything Esera had read and seen hadn't prepared her for a male of this culture being so forward. Inside, Aredian the Eldest was already sitting at the table, and she gave them a sly smile.

"Ah, the Raxian actress and actor," she said. "You two almost had me fooled, you know. You've got the rest of those idiots out there seeing what they want to see, but you'll have to do better than that where I'm concerned."

"I'd rather not," Esera said. She turned to her engineer. "No offense, Miha."

"None taken, I'd be uncomfortable too," he said.

"You've got the subservience down right, boy," Aredian went on. "Is your home planet's culture female-dominated? And don't tell me you're a military man, you don't hold yourself like one."

Voyan stared at Aredian for a moment. "Alien-dominated," he said. "By blaster and electro-whip, if need be."

"Shameful," said Aredian, shaking her head. "No Human planet should suffer alien feet upon it. Not even silly ones that let their men run around freely. Isn't that right, Razel?"

"That's right, Mila," said the old man.

"Please, sit, my young Raxian noblewoman, and whoever you are, boy." Mila Aredian gestured to the chairs. Razel, her apparent husband, brought tea, and then served breakfast, which was unsatisfyingly light and cold for Esera's tastes.

"Not to your standards, my lady?" Aredian asked, obviously sensing her emotions in the Force.

"I just prefer warm food," said Esera.

"Raxus does get cold in the winter, I've heard."

Stalimur gets colder, I bet, she thought, safe behind a mental shield. Esera hoped Voyan's own shield was up to the task of keeping in stray thoughts. *Information is power,* Ado Eemon had written to her some few months ago. *Guard it well.*

Her dig into Esera's background blunted, Aredian switched tracks: "You're a witch, aren't you?" Esera gave her a sidelong look.

"There are other words I'd use for what people like us are."

"Yes, witch isn't a very polite word, is it? We prefer *wise women,* here," said Aredian. "I'm not sure how wise we really are, seeing our current military-political situation. But certainly wiser than the likes of Taclai, wouldn't you agree?"

"Definitely," Esera muttered into her tea.

"Wise women like us get the pick of everything. Would you believe Razel here was once one of the most sought-after young men in this city?" Aredian laughed, an oddly normal sound coming from someone as sharp as her. Razel just smirked.

"And there was a time when you didn't look like an over-dried raisin," he said.

Aredian lightly slapped his hand, but smiled. "You watch your tongue!"

They're a bit like Oyane and Taru, thought Esera, recalling the mature Zeltron monarchs. *But it's a lot more obvious who's in charge, here...*

"Are there wise men?" Voyan asked, suddenly.

"Naughty, naughty, speaking without permission," Aredian scolded mockingly. "But I'll indulge your foreign barbarism, boy. Officially, men with these powers are hunted down and executed. They're far too dangerous to be left alive. You know how you lot are- emotional, violent, unpredictable. Combine that with these abilities and you've got some dangerous individuals, yes? But unofficially, we've been using them to refine the bloodlines of wise women for generations. I'm the product of such refinement, and so is my daughter, and my granddaughter. But they have yet to reach my level of ability."

Esera didn't like hearing any of that. Try as she might to keep her face neutral, her lips tugged down into the slightest of frowns. And this did not go unnoticed by Aredian, whose mouth turned ever so slightly upwards in response. There was no warmth in those old eyes, not for Esera.

"You're creating a Force-sensitive elite..." said Voyan. "I've always wondered why the Jedi never did that."

"Some did," Esera told him. "And then they became the *Sith*."

"You say Sith like it's a forbidden word," said Aredian.

"I don't have the highest opinion of them," said Esera.

"Perhaps that is because of your sympathies to the Jedi?"

"Perhaps," Esera said, sipping her tea to stop herself from saying anything damning.

"We see the Sith another way, here. I thought you Raxians did, too."

"What gave you that idea?"

"It's on your flag, dear. That hexagon of yours." Aredian glanced over at Voyan, who had stirred. "You look like you've got something to say, boy. Speak."

"The number six seems to be of some significance to the Sith movement. The Sith movement has always been based in the Outer Rim, while the Republic and the Jedi have always been exerting power outwards from the Core. The Sith have become linked to the idea of rejecting the Republic's authority... And the Jedi's." said Voyan. His eyes darted to Esera for a moment, and his hands tensed. "That's why our flag, the Confederacy's flag, consists of six parts creating a six-sided whole. The government on Raxus, and Count Dooku, were acknowledging themselves as the successors to the Sith tradition of fighting back against the Core powers."

In the Force, Voyan was on edge. And it wasn't because of Aredian, the most powerful woman on this planet, no. It was because of *Esera*. All that sudden tension was linked to her, there was no doubt. She was the Jedi in the room, after all. *Fighting back, he says,* Esera thought, now letting her frown show freely.

"The Sith have instigated every war with the Republic and the Jedi," said Esera. *Including this one,* she didn't dare say. "They're evil. The dark side can do nothing but destroy. Every Sith empire there's ever been has brought nothing but death and strife to the Galaxy."

"And the Hutts say the Ash Worlds were created by a supernova, not by their genocide of the Kiirium Reaches a thousand generations ago," Voyan said. He and Esera stared each other down for a moment. There was no hostility in Voyan, just a firm conviction. A wrong conviction, born out of understandable reasoning built on unfortunate ignorance. More than anything Esera wished she could toss the two old Emberleners out and explain to her engineer the reality of things, but the Eldest reminded them of her presence.

"I believe what the boy means to say is that history is written by the victor," said Aredian. "And victorious you Jedi have been."

I guess I made it obvious, thought Esera.

"I'm curious as to how a Jedi ended up in the employ of that abominable machine," Aredian went on. "But I doubt you'd tell me. This boy of yours is sharp-minded, Lady Komara. For a male, at least."

"It comes with his insufferability," Esera said, eyes narrowing.

"Being correct does allow for some degree of smugness. I think he's onto something. Your Confederacy of Independent Systems is the ideological successor to the so-called Sith empires. Raxus and the Sun Guard are cut from the same cloth, however distant. And so are we."

Just like the eugenics program, there'd been nothing in Emberlene's official history about Sith connections. Immediately, Esera was on guard. Mila Aredian being Force-sensitive was one thing. Her being a dark side user would be something else. "I wasn't aware," said Esera.

"The Thyrsians rebelled against the Echani, many centuries ago. They formed the Sun Guard to fight them. While the Echani had been aligned with the Republic, the Thyrsians sided with the Sith Empire. But Echani loyalty to the Republic has been... overstated." Aredian drank from her cup of tea, and sat it down on the saucer. "Razel, dear, please take this tray into the kitchen."

Her husband obeyed. "History's not my thing, anyway," he muttered.

"The Echani aren't Human," Esera said. "You are."

"They were, once. So were the Thyrsians. There was some genetic alteration involved. But when you get down into the genes, they're both Human. Now, as I was saying, some Echani split off and joined the Thyrsians in their service to the Sith. After Ruusan, this alignment to the suddenly-headless Sith Empire was no longer in fashion. These Echani married baseline Humans, and their children married baseline Humans, and they all hid in a little corner of the Galaxy filled with high-mass stars and nebulae that made access troublesome at best. They bred the Echani phenotype away, becoming ordinary Humans on the outside. They've had run-ins with their old allies, the Sun Guard, and since these once-Echani kept their civilized matriarchal ways, the barbarous men of Thyrsus labeled them their eternal foe. Unfortunately, the descendants of these fugitives greatly overestimated their own abilities."

"I see," Esera said. And that was all she could say. This woman had just dumped the secret history of her planet and people onto her, so casually.

Voyan leaned forward. "So, you're saying you *are* aliens?"

Aredian looked offended; she scowled. "Of course not, silly boy. We are Humans. Another breed of Humans, but Humans nonetheless."

"You're quite proud of your species. What if I told everyone here the truth?" Esera asked.

"As if they'd believe a foreign woman who wears a dress," Aredian scoffed. "Fighter or not, little Jedi, you've marked yourself as a misogynist."

That remark turned the heat up on the Komara temper. Maira would have put this mean old hag in her place, and so would Esera. She blurted out the first thing that came to mind: "Well, I guess that makes you a misandrist!"

"Yes," said Aredian, leaving Esera's mouth to move silently as she tried to figure out how to deal with that rebuttal.

"Esera embraces her culture as strongly as you do, Mistress Aredian," said Voyan, coming to her rescue.

"Arguing for your woman does her no good, boy. In fact, it worsens her case, that she has to rely on you for anything."

"In a healthy Human society, men and women work together," Voyan said. "I'm not surprised the Authalans have the boot on your throat. Quite honestly, I'd let them finish the job." That conviction of his was back again, backed by something harder and colder. Esera had felt that from him in the Zeltron palace, when he'd spoken out against the allegedly victimless drug trade the Zeltrons turned a blind eye to. This was another one of those hills Voyan would die on.

Aredian smiled, but she matched his coldness, degree for degree. "Mouthy, aren't you? If it wasn't for this Raxian girl, I might teach you a lesson. I could smash through that fragile mind of yours in just a few heartbeats... I could leave you a drooling imbecile, or a screaming maniac. But I need the Raxian girl. Because you are right, boy. The Authalans have outdone us. And as humiliating as peace is, it'll give us the chance we need to re-arm. Half the Mistryl Army is still out there with that cyborg of yours, after all. And when they come back, they'll be the finest fighting force in the sector. All we need is time, and you're getting it for us."

Esera wanted to strike this witch down right now. Her stomach twisted at the thought she was helping these people prepare for their next war. But Grievous had given her a mission. He needed those Emberleners in his fleet to stay in his fleet. Throwing the irrelevant Authala Sector to these heartless monsters in order to secure a galaxy free of the machinations of Darth Sidious... Esera hated the idea. But it was what she was here to do. Grievous could say whatever he wanted to her; she was following in his footsteps, no matter how far behind him she was.

Neither woman needed further words. Their eyes met, and the Force carried everything they needed to know about each other. They would work together. This time. But Esera knew if she ever came back to Emberlene, things would be different. And Aredian was ready for that.

"Thank you for breakfast, Mistress Aredian," Esera said, stiffly. She stood up, and offered Voyan her arm. "Miha and I will be retiring to our quarters. Please alert me when the enemy arrives."

"Of course," said Aredian, with a pleasant smile. "It was most enlightening, talking to you."

A day and a half later, that alert came. The Authalans had arrived in-system.

Sanya had been on a *Venator* once, before a jump into a system not entirely secure. There'd been alarms blaring, announcements and orders on the comms, a torrent of anxiety and excitement. *Encounter*, on the other hand, was as silent as the grave. All the proof that they were about to head into battle was the blinking red lights in the hallway. At least until Buna came on the comm.

"*Action stations, you rats!*" she bellowed. "*Eighteen bogeys on the scanner! Move fast!*"

It was the least formal call to arms Sanya had ever heard. She really was a pirate.

Sanya had been told to go to her cabin, but she'd gone to Alize's instead, too nervous to be alone. She and the big Zygerrian were strapped into seats bolted to the wall, so that their backs faced aft. Just like on a *Venator*.

"It's in case inertial dampeners fail," she told Alize, who barely got the safety harness around her stomach.

"Wouldn't that be lovely?" Alize grumbled.

"I mean, if they did fail while we're at full acceleration, we'd be red goo on the bulkhead instantly, so I don't get what the point is."

Alize's ears tilted back. "Thank you Sanya, I really needed to hear that right now."

"Sorry."

Encounter rumbled and groaned, and all the lights but the emergency ones shut off as all available power went to more vital systems. The ship's crew quarters were all buried deep inside the hull, but every one had a 'window' that was really a projection from a camera on the exterior. But all Sanya could see there were stars.

The ship rocked suddenly, and Sanya and Alize were flung to the side, only their straps held them to the chairs. More rumbles, more groans, and then the ship shook like it'd been hit with a giant hammer. "I hate this," Sanya said, as her heart raced faster and faster.

"You're not the one getting squeezed like a tube of paste," Alize grunted in response, trying to find some slack in her harness.

Another shake, even greater than before, and Sanya heard a noise from somewhere in the corridor. Her mind filled with nightmare imagery of the hall depressurizing, debris and air sucked into space, with only the cabin door between them and the vacuum. But she didn't hear the rush of atmosphere or the shriek of metal. The emergency lights flickered as they were flung around in the chairs again and gravity briefly doubled, leaving them gasping for breath, like the Galaxy's most terrifying amusement park ride.

"We're going to die," Sanya whined. From enemy action or giving herself a heart attack, she didn't know.

"Just close your eyes," Alize said to her, holding her hand. "Close your eyes and wait for it to be over."

The rumbling and groaning, rocking and shaking, went on, as the deck plates hummed with vibrations from the engines a kilometer aft. Sanya tried to look out the fake window, but seeing the stars wheeling around and catching the occasional glimpse of the local sun flashing by just made her feel sick. The endless bumps and jolts as the ship took fire didn't help.

And then, quiet. The lights came back on.

"*Seventeen bogeys bagged, damn fine work*," Buna's voice said over the intercom. "*But it ain't over yet. They came from a different vector than expected, that means they're gatherin' somewhere else than Juandomar. And they could bring friends any minute. Stay sharp!*"

"I don't think I can go through that again," Sanya said, her voice shaking as badly as her hands were right now.

"You get used to it," Alize sighed, with a dead-eyed stare at the wall.

"That was an impressive performance," said Admiral Lidelia.

"They missed one," General Taclai said, arms crossed.

"It's seventeen less ships you'll have to deal with," Esera told them. "Or would you rather I take *Encounter* and leave?"

Taclai's face darkened, and she sneered. But she didn't speak.

Encounter had danced through the enemy formation, making mincemeat of the Authala Alliance home-built corvettes. Her shields had taken a pounding, but they'd never been in danger of falling. Buna said they'd be at full capacity again in less than half an hour, as *Encounter*'s radiator vanes bled off the waste heat of the energy they'd absorbed.

What worried Esera is that there'd been no Sun Guard ships in that scouting force. And since they'd come in from the opposite direction of Juandomar, the Alliance and their mercenaries could have been staging the next attack in a star system as little as three light years away. Even in this remote backwater, three light years was not a long distance.

"They were merely testing our defenses," Aredian said. "The real battle comes next."

"Yes it does," agreed Esera.

Voyan was staring at the hologram read-out of the system, his eyes locked on *Encounter*'s marker. He'd lived alone on that ship for a month, putting her back together piece by piece, before Esera turned up on it. Being down here, sipping Emberlener tea and eating Emberlener fruit slices, while the sum of his life's work for the past half-year battled it out without him... well, Esera could understand if his mind was someplace else.

The display lit up with red. "Contact!" a technician announced. "Multiple contacts! Sixty- seventy- eighty- ninety- one hundred and thirty-three ships, all enemy!"

One hundred and thirty-three!? Esera's blood went cold.

Encounter was powerful, out here, but not that powerful.

What made Esera even more nervous was the fact everything they saw was taking place in the past. *Encounter* was seeing it in real-time, but the lag between her data transmissions and Emberlene grew greater and greater as she moved away from the planet to face the Authala Alliance. The luxury of hyperwave technology was something she'd never take for granted again.

"We've got Sun Guard," someone said. "One *Gladiator* -class star destroyer, two *Kontos*-class frigates, four *Vigil* -class corvettes. The rest are Alliance."

"*Gladiator*!" Voyan hissed beneath his breath.

The *Gladiator*s were old ships, meant for middle-rate star systems that wanted a ship that could do everything- launch fighters, land troops, chase down pirates, and protect planets. That's exactly what the *Gladiator* could do, but it couldn't do any one of those tasks as well as dedicated ships to those roles could. But for governments on a budget, the *Gladiator* had been a good choice, before the Republic requisitioned as many as it could. It had been a good choice for the Sun Guard too, apparently. Esera didn't know as much about the *Kontos* and *Vigil*. They were newer, and made for customers in the Mid and Outer Rim. They carried few fighters, but were well-armed for their size.

The other Alliance ships were home-built, many no bigger than a *Consular*-class escort ship. Most of them were starfighters. Esera recognized some names. The G-400, the Dianoga, the MorningStar, the Dagger- these were ubiquitous in the pre-war years, found in every mercenary outfit between Terminus and the former Corporate Sector, and many of the star systems in-between. Of the one hundred and thirty-three ships *Encounter* faced, seven were Sun Guard Kuati ships, ten more were mercenary corvettes, fifty were the Alliance's own planetary warships, pitiable by the standards Esera was used to, and the rest were mercenary or local starfighters.

So, we've got a chance, she thought. The Kuati ships were key to the enemy's assault. If Buna could take those out, the rest would fall. Hopefully.

"Here we go again," Alize said, strapping back in.

"Just give me a tranquilizer or something," Sanya groaned. "I don't want to go through that again. Nothing's worse than not knowing you're going to be alive one moment or-"

"Yes, Sanya, I know," said Alize, strain in her voice. "Now, how about you go through that alone and learn how it was for me at Zeltros?"

"Sorry," Sanya said, heat in her face.

Were it not for the intermission, Sanya might have thought they were in the same battle. It was *exactly* the same. She got queasy as the ship rocked and jolted, she grew frightened when the lights flickered and strange noises echoed through the hall, she tried not to look at the fake window as the stars spun every which way outside.

But then, the cabin door opened. Oto stood there, gripping the frame as the ship rocked once more. "You two, with me," she said.

"What?" Sanya squeaked.

"Huh?" One of Alize's ears drooped down.

"We need someone strong and we need someone small. Move it!" the Cathar barked.

Off they went into the warship, in the middle of battle. The lights were no longer blinking red, they were staying red. As they rushed down the corridors, dodging repair drones, Oto gave them each a headset, and suddenly, the two civilians were in the loop.

"*-down two, down three*," Buna's voice was saying. "*Get a move on it, Durm, I need that turret firing!*"

"*Moving,*" said Durm.

"I got Alize and Sanya," Oto said into her microphone.

"*I need Sanya at junction L4-A5,*" Zule said.

"Where is that?" Sanya asked.

"*Switch to channel 7.*" She did so. "*Okay, it's just us and Klaud. We're at*..."

Encounter was a bigger ship than Sanya thought. The inhabited volume was not large, in the designs, but it was minuscule compared to the kilometers of labyrinth that was a *Venator*. But the uninhabited area was still pressurized, and somewhat warm, for outer space. Sanya felt the chill to her bones as she got closer to the outer hull. Klaud was slicing apart a wall panel, while Zule looked over a datapad.

"Great, you're here," said Zule. *Encounter* jolted, and for a split second, they were in free fall. Sanya didn't even have time to feel nauseous. Zule went on like nothing had happened. "Here's the problem. We've got an overheated capacitor three sections back from here. It shouldn't be that hot, so something's wrong. The problem is that Klaud and I are too big to go back there, and this part of the ship got messed up over Zeltros. We rebuilt it at Minntooine and... well... someone didn't update the repair drones' mapping for this part of the ship. Thank you, Miha Voyan, very helpful."

"What can I do?" asked Sanya. "No, really, *what* do you expect me to do? My mechanical experience is patching garden hoses!"

"You're the only one small enough who can get through the drones' access tunnels. I'm gonna have you wear this little camera on your headset, I'm gonna give you the tools, and I'm gonna tell you what to do step by step."

Tunnels? Sanya felt like vomiting, and screaming, at the same time. "I don't do tunnels," she said. "I need open space-"

"Okay, get us all killed, then," said Zule, with a flat stare.

Klaud made a noise, full of disdain.

"Yeah, what he said." Zule put her hands on her hips.

"Fine, I'll do it." Sanya really did feel sick, and it wasn't from the constant shifting of momentum getting through the inertial dampeners. She crawled through the hole in the wall, and into the drone tunnel. It was completely unlit, but for her headset's tiny light. Already, Sanya was sweating, as the walls closed in around her.

"Go twenty meters straight ahead," Zule said.

"Like there's any other direction," Sanya muttered, beginning her crawl. The tunnel was too narrow to turn around in. She couldn't even look behind her, her shoulders and hips brushed both sides of it. The side-effects of the battle outside became even worse. The tunnels echoed with crashes and creaks, shrieks and groans, and the metal buzzed with the ever-present vibrations from the engine block. Every bump and jolt sent Sanya smashing against the tunnel wall, ceiling, or floor, and she was sore everywhere. Panic rose in her throat, and all that kept her going was the fact that crawling feet-first backwards through this tunnel would be even worse than what she was going through now.

Sanya entered into a junction of tunnels, just as dark as anything else. "What now?" she asked on her headset.

"*Go left*," said Zule. "*Ten meters, then go right.*"

It was getting hot in the tunnels. Capacitors stored the heat of the energy the shields absorbed... Sanya gulped, as her anxiety rose. *What am I even doing?* she wondered, as tools on her belt that she'd never seen before in her life clanked against the metal floor. She took the first right she could, and the heat got worse.

"It's really warming up down here," Sanya said, struggling to contort her body around the corner.

"*Yeah, that'll happen in a situation like this*," Zule's voice came, laced with static. If they lost contact, Sanya was going to freak out. She came to a closed hatch, that was hot to the touch. "*You feel any heat?*"

"Yeah," said Sanya. "Yeah, it is."

"*You're right where you need to be. Open that hatch.*"

"You're not supposed to open doors that are hot-"

"*Trust me, it's okay. Open it.*"

Sanya groaned, and used the manual lever to open the hatch. The tiny passageway opened up into a... she wasn't quite sure what she was looking at. Huge coils glowed a fiery orange, blasting her face with heat. *This must be the capacitor,* she thought. *The inside of one...*

"*Great, get in there,*" Zule said.

"What!? Can't you see how those things are glowing?"

"*Look, as long as you're in and out within three minutes you'll be fine,*" Zule said. "*There's almost no moisture in the air in there, it's not gonna kill you instantly.*"

"I can't do this, Zule!"

"*Hey, calm down, Sanya. I'm right here, watching everything you see. I'm telling you, nothing permanent will happen if you're in and out in three minutes.*"

"That's some reassurance."

"*Sanya. Get in there and do what I say, or we all die.*"

Sanya let out a groan of dismay, but she forced herself inside. The heat was unbearable, she raised an arm to her eyes which had dried out almost instantly.

"*On your right, there's a switchboard.*" Sanya peeked, and saw it. They were big, mechanical switches, nothing digital. "*That one in the middle is pointing up. It needs to be down.*"

"Okay," said Sanya, using one of Zule's tools to flip the switch without touching it.

"*Good. Can you look around the rest of the capacitor?*"

Sanya shuffled around, uncovering her eyes every few seconds to make sure she didn't walk into one of the glowing coils.

"*Stop. That coil is cracked.*"

"What do you want me to do?"

"*Nothing you can do while this thing's in use. Get out of there.*"

Sanya didn't need to be told twice. She dived for the hatchway, and hit the access lever with her feet, cutting off the horrid heat. She let herself lay on the relatively cool metal outside, gasping. *That wasn't even two minutes,* she thought, *I didn't even have time to start sweating.* Her skin felt dry, very dry. That heat had probably burned the moisture right out of it.

"*So, that switch was a safety feature designed to cut back on the load of the capacitor if it got damaged. It has been damaged. We're guaranteed it's going to blow, now, but hopefully it'll blow after the battle, and not during it. We also know what exactly the problem is, so thanks for that, too,*" Zule said. "*Get back out here, I'll guide you out.*"

Her heart was still hammering by the time she was out, hands shaking as adrenaline left her. Sanya gulped down the relatively cool air of the hall. "Never again," she gasped.

"Maybe again," said Zule, patting her shoulder. "You did good. Breathe deep, clear your mind, do those things you learned at the Temple."

Sanya could only nod, and try. It'd been a long time since she tried to act like the Jedi she'd never be. Then *Encounter* rocked again, sending the two women and the Trodatome slamming against the bulkheads. Klaud honked in alarm.

"That didn't feel good," Zule said, tension in her voice that wasn't there a moment ago. She brought a hand to her headset, and Sanya did too, tuning into bridge comms.

"*Damage report!*" Buna yelled.

"*Shields down, mid-port,*" a droid said.

"*Durm, I want those shields back up!*"

"*Already on it,*" Durm said.

"*Incoming, twelve more fighters and three corvettes,*" another droid said.

"*Shoot them down!*"

"*All batteries are currently engaged, Captain,*" said the droid's voice.

Buna just growled.

"I don't like how this sounds," Sanya muttered.

"Yeah, me either," Zule agreed.

"*Captain,*" Durm's voice came, "*are you using the active scanner suite? It can blind most second-rate sensors at full power.*"

"*Droid, are we?*" Buna asked.

"*Negative, Captain. The droid network has restricted use of that tactic to preserve corporate intellectual properties-*"

"*To hell with intellectual properties! Use everythin' we've got!*"

"*Roger, roger.*"

"Voyan said we used that trick, back at Zeltros," Zule said, standing a little straighter. "Secret corporate fleet weapon. It'll fry some scanners, I'll bet."

"I hope so," said Sanya. *Encounter* shook again, and there was a distant boom; Klaud bumped against the bulkhead and Sanya fell flat onto her butt. "I really hope so!"

"Your ship is struggling," General Taclai said, giving Esera a sneer.

"I invite the Emberlener Armada to fight outnumbered a hundred to one," Esera said back, barely keeping her voice level. She was in a cold sweat, watching her ship and her crew teeter on the razor's edge of being overwhelmed. *I should be up there,* she thought. *I could... I could...* What exactly could she do up there? Use the Force? On starships? *Yeah, right.* If the Alliance wanted to talk, Esera was down on the planet to talk to them. That was what she could do.

Taclai and some of the other Elders just went right on sneering, but they didn't rise to her challenge. The nineteen ships of the Armada orbited above, held back from the battle, a final line of defense. *Encounter* danced like a starfighter, her immense power-to-mass ratio out-accelerating even the enemy's light craft. Size didn't matter, in space, but power output sure did, and *Encounter* was a first rate ship of the line going up against budget foes. How much fuel she was burning right now didn't matter, but Esera had the suspicion she'd need to call in a tanker when this was over.

If *Encounter* survived.

Taclai was right, the destroyer was struggling. Her shields were starting to fail, her auxiliary radiators had been deployed to cope with the sheer amount of heat she was putting out, her movements were noticeably quicker as she burned away fuel mass. All around her, the enemy was dying, as they did the only sensible thing with the only advantage they had: hit *Encounter* from every possible angle at every possible moment. Sooner or later, something would get through. Or the enemy's morale would break.

There were signs of it. The mercenary ships were becoming more cautious in their assault, as casualties mounted. Even the Sun Guard were keeping their cool now. But the Alliance pilots and crews were without fear. They fought for the freedom of their homes and people, knowing this battle against the tyrants who would grind them underfoot was going to be the final battle of the war, one way or another. *Those are some brave men and women dying out there,* Esera thought, watching another flight of outdated starfighters melt under the onslaught of *Encounter*'s point-defense cannons. Mila Aredian, Eldest of the Elders, just smiled heartlessly at Esera.

"You respect them, Lady Komara," said Aredian.

"I do," said Esera. "The Confederacy fights for the same reasons they fight. I have to respect them. I'd be on their side, if I had a choice."

"A shame you're stuck with us." Aredian smirked.

"Is this really the girl we're trusting to negotiate for us?" asked the Armada's admiral.

"She'll do as the cyborg says. I don't get the sense she's brave enough to stand up to him."

Esera had half a mind to kill the horrible woman right there. She clenched her fists, right hand spasming like the useless thing it was. Instead she looked over to Voyan, who seemed to be feeling exactly what she was. His face had lost some color, and while he had his usual impassive mask on, Esera didn't need the Force to see he was beset with anxiety. Even more than her, he belonged up on that ship right now. He didn't even have the excuse of being a diplomat, he was here for Esera's convenience. *I'm sorry, Voyan,* she thought.

"I forgot to map the new sections for the repair drones," Voyan whispered to her, tapping a finger on the holotable rapidly.

"Durm will have it covered," Esera whispered back, putting her hand on his arm. "And maybe Zule Xiss, too."

"Even at a time like this, you still hate her."

"Hate's a strong word."

That got a tiny, momentary, smile out of him.

All they could do was watch what already happened minutes ago, as their home fought like she'd never fought before, without them.

"*Why didn't you tell me about these jammers half an hour ago!?*" Buna roared over comms.

"*I didn't know if they were active or not!*" answered Durm. "*This isn't my ship!*"

"*You're actin' chief engineer, you'd damn well better know!*" The big reptilian descended into the hissing curses of her native tongue, and Sanya was very glad she was far from the bridge.

"Looks like the scanners are making a difference," said Zule, wiping the sweat off her brow. They'd just finished another emergency repair on a laser cannon turret's power feed.

"What are they doing?" asked Sanya.

Klaud made his noises.

"Yeah, that's right," said Zule. "Scanners sound out energy waves as they scan. Pump enough power into them and you can fry other ships' sensors. Like if you looked up at the sun while using macrobinoculars, you know? Same principle. We've probably fried anything that's not Kuati within twenty thousand kilometers of us. They're attacking by visuals alone."

The bumps, lurches, and distant explosions had lessened off in the last few minutes. *Encounter*'s point defenses must have been shredding any blinded ships that got too close. But the Kuati-made ships... those were still out there.

"*We got a clear shot at that* Gladiator*!*" Buna said. "*Line up the prow gun, blast that piece of-*"

Encounter rumbled, but it was a different rumble. Power pulsed under the deck, and the lights dimmed as the ship shook with the recoil of the heavy turbolaser.

Buna laughed, and that was all the report Sanya needed on what'd just happened. "*I always wanted to be on this side of the shootin',*" Buna said for all to hear.

"*Captain, that frigate is approaching on a collision course!*" a droid exclaimed.

Zule swore. "They're turning our own trick on us!"

"*Shoot it down!*"

"*Something's launching-*"

Encounter rocked like she'd never rocked before, the lights died and gravity failed for a full three seconds. Zule, Sanya, and Klaud all went floating into the ceiling, before power came back and they dropped onto the deck. Buna came over the comms immediately:

"*Durm, Xiss, reactor's readin' coolant loss. Imminent core breach-*"

A hiss of static, and Buna was gone. For a second, darkness closed in around Sanya's vision. Two of the most dangerous words ever to hear aboard a starship: *core breach*.

Zule grabbed her hand. "Come on!" she screamed.

"Wait, we're going *towards* the reactor!?"

"Hell yes we are! More hands, faster work! Move it!"

Sanya moved, and Klaud somehow kept up with them, his flapper-feet slapping against the deck as he lumbered after them.

They met Durm, Oto, Murshida, and one very sweaty and tired Alize at the reactor room seal. "Suit up," Durm ordered. "We've got maybe five minutes to patch this pipe and get coolant flowing again."

Klaud made an agitated sound. There were no suits for Trodatomes in the emergency locker.

"I don't think there'll be a radiation leak in there," said Durm. "But I won't ask you to go in."

The strange alien shook what constituted his head, eyes narrowed in resolve. Sanya was secretly glad, she had a feeling they'd need skilled labor in there.

"Why do hypermatter reactors need coolant?" asked Sanya, as they put on their anti-radiation suits.

"Hypermatter isn't stable, it reacts violently to exposure to normal matter" said Zule. "The force fields containing it run hot. Very hot."

"Great," said Sanya. "Why are we going in there? Isn't this what drones are for?"

"Do you trust a Commerce Guild drone?" asked Oto, as she put her helmet on.

"Well, no-"

"Neither do I!"

Sanya tried to stay in the moment. Even thinking about entering an about-to-explode hypermatter reactor's chamber would freeze her up. So she didn't think about it. *Coolant pipes. Like garden hoses. I've patched a million hoses. I can do this,* Sanya told herself, as her hands started shaking again. *I can do this. I'm scared to death, but I can do this!*

The impromptu engineering team opened the seal, the meter-thick doors slowly rolling back. The hypermatter reactor was something out of a nightmare. On one side of the room, a great bulb held the exotic matter, and on the other, another bulb held the reactant. Between them, an eerie green glow, growing stronger by the moment, bathed everything in a sickly light. In that place, the force fields contained the ongoing explosion, and fed its power into the ship.

The problem wasn't hard to spot: a pipe had burst along one wall, and the deck was slick with liters of spilled coolant fluid. Two meters of the pipe were just *gone*. And they had minutes to fix it.

Luckily, Miha Voyan was a somewhat paranoid man. He'd stacked spare lengths of piping in a corner of the chamber. Maybe he'd known this was a possibility on a ten year old, hard-run warship.

"Get those pipes over here!" Durm shouted through his intercom. "Zule, Oto, Sanya, get the welding torches! Klaud, help me cut away the ripped metal."

Murshida pulled Alize with him; his armor its own radiation suit. "Leave the lifting to us," Murshida said. The two big aliens carried the pipes over, while Oto and Durm sliced away the shredded parts of the pipe and threw them over their shoulders. Klaud ran his facial tentacles along the cut edge of the pipe, and used what looked like an angle grinder to make tiny adjustments, before pulling away, confident the cut was perfectly perpendicular to the metal. Murshida and Alize slammed the pipe into place, and everyone else began to weld it into position. Never had Sanya welded in her life, she just followed the leads of the others.

Durm went to a control panel. "Tell me when!" he yelled, as the green light blazed brighter.

"Now!" said Oto.

Durm slammed a fist on a button, and machinery whirred to life somewhere. The Neimoidian stared at the panel, but shook his head. "Too slow, too slow," he groaned. "Alize, Murshida, hit the manual override on the hypermatter pumps!"

The two rushed to the big levers on the wall, and wrenched them down. Instantly, the green glow faded, and the constant vibration of the engines stopped. The ship went quiet, but for the bumps and scrapes far away on the outer hull, as debris impacted them. "We're safe, everyone out!" Durm told them.

They fled the chamber, as the green glow started to dim, and Durm shut the seal on the chamber. The hall was lit only by emergency lights. Helmets came off, and Sanya threw her arms around Alize. "No one told me it'd be like this," she sighed.

"Me neither, kid," said Alize, patting her back. "I'm just the damned cook, what am I doing in a reactor room?"

"Saving us all," said Zule, leaning against the wall. Klaud grumbled, a possible agreement.

"Good work, everyone," Durm said, wiping sweat off his face. "We've saved the ship, for this minute, at least. But we're adrift, now."

"No one's blown us up, yet," Oto said. "Buna did her side of the job."

"That she did, lieutenant." Durm reported to the bridge over comms. "We shut down the reactor, Captain, we didn't have time for the coolant to take effect. We've got enough backup power to run internal systems and some shields, that's it."

Whatever Buna's response was, Sanya couldn't hear it. But Durm's cheery countenance vanished, his red Neimoidian eyes went wide at whatever he was hearing in his headset. Comms must have been out for everyone else, too, because smiles slipped away and they all stared at Durm. He swallowed. "Understood, Captain."

"What's going on?" asked Oto.

Durm turned to them all. "We've been boarded."

Zule jumped for a wall console with a small monitor, and tuned in to the security cameras. The others crowded around. Sanya expected mercenaries, maybe Sun Guard, or soldiers of the Authala Alliance. But instead, in the hangar, was a Republic *Nu*-class attack shuttle, minus one wing.

And slicing through the blast doors were four clone commandos.

Author's responses to Valued Reviewers and general rambling:

Welcome to Sanya's wild ride, folks, it never ends. This chapter was a unique challenge so far in this story, I've done space battles from the strategy table and space battles from the bridge, but I've never done a space battle from the perspective of a helpless passenger, or someone deep inside the ship fixing things who had no idea what's going on outside. I'm partially satisfied, but you can only write about the ship shaking so many times... Still, it was something new. And we'll continue to get new experiences next time! Before anyone asks, no, it's not Delta Squad boarding the ship, and it's not the Bad Batch either (more on them later in these paragraphs though).

I hope the Valued Reviewers (particularly Valued Editor Corshy) are satisfied with what they've learned of Emberlene's past. The Echani are genetically modified humans who have what I interpreted to be a stifling matriarchal culture, enough to make the Thyrsian men (the Sun Guard) revolt. Being Sith-aligned Echani refugees, Emberlene continued this culture without change as they modified themselves back into outwardly baseline human appearances.

It is also my conjecture that the Sith Empire's legacy among the educated of the Outer Rim is one of "resist the Core, man" and "that's like, tyranny, dude." Han Solo and General Motti both are dismissive of the sorcerers' ways, despite having been children during the Clone Wars and probably seen Jedi on the Holonet. Let's be fair, if, in 2021, you saw Shaolin monks doing "magic" on Chinese state TV, would you believe it? No, you'd have to be a bigger CCP simp than John Cena, Disney, the NBA, and every scrawny white male perma-grad student Maoist combined to believe that. Under the likely fact that most people in the Galaxy do not understand Jedi and Sith and think they're a bunch of crazy mystics, I believe the Sith Empire's legacy as an interstellar polity controlling billions of people a thousand and more years ago was not hurr durr evil guys in black robes but instead exactly what I've presented here. And something like that would not be easily forgotten. Star Wars is a forgetful universe, but we're still arguing about who's the successor to the Roman Empire today, I don't think the Sith Empire's memory would just vanish like it never existed.

Moving on. An anonymous Valued Reviewer said it was unbelievable that ASD 2.0 doesn't have a TVtropes page. Well, since posting the last chapter, a TVtropes page has appeared. I appreciate that someone cared enough to make one. Well done, anonymous, well done. However. The very first entry says Esera's ship is named *Endurance* (word appears in this story: 2 times), not *Encounter* (word appears in this story: 288 times). Quite the mix-up, eh? While I, the author, am dead and how you interpret my story (and thus tropes involved) is not my business, I have to bring it up, because *Encounter*'s name isn't up to subjective interpretation. That being said, my hat is off to whomever applied the Esera principle of "If not me, then who?"

Valued Reviewers still want me to host this story on other sites. I will seriously consider AO3, if I find the energy to give the pre-Corshy chapters the massive editing they need. No forums, though, I don't want to deal with the hassle of posting almost 400,000 words of fic in a billion forum posts and then having to hyperlink everything into a table of contents and deal with forum people who had too much Filoni Wars in their youth...

Speaking of my favorite punching bag, I've been watching the Bad Batch and have been surprised that it's actually become tolerable. It's like someone flipped a switch from typical Filoni schlock (i.e., why exactly was Saw Gerrera running into the woods literally 6 hours after the Empire was established?) to actual talented writing the moment a certain clone appeared in Cid's bar. And they said the C-word! Yes, Valued Readers, that's right, the word "Confederacy" [of Independent Systems] was said out loud in Star Wars for the first time in nine (9) (IX) (𝟡) (九) years! Somewhere out there, I hope, a Disney public relations committee is seething that the naughtiest word in American history made it back into Star Wars. On that positive note, I'll see you guys in August, with the conclusion of the Emberlene arc!

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